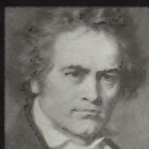


*An exhibition that examines the history
of asthma, the experiences of people
with asthma, and contemporary efforts
to understand and manage the disease.*



BREATH OF LIFE



National Library of Medicine

National Institutes of Health

8600 Rockville Pike

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Dr. Willis's Practice of Physick

Thomas Willis (1621–1675), London, 1684

Asthma: From Symptom to Disease

During the seventeenth century, English physicians such as Thomas Willis and Sir John Floyer began arguing that asthma was different from other breathing disorders, and the same from person to person. They maintained that asthma, as a specific form of disordered breathing, must be treated differently from other forms of breathlessness.

By the late nineteenth century, physicians believed that asthma was a disease which had a specific set of causes, clinical consequences, and requirements for treatment despite the diversity of individual experiences.



*Compound monocular microscope,
made after 1879. Manufactured by
W. & H. Seibert, Wetzlar, Germany*
Courtesy Historical Collections, The National
Museum of Health and Medicine, Armed Forces
Institute of Pathology, Washington, D.C.

Four Perspectives on Asthma

What is asthma? Four distinct, although overlapping, answers have endured side by side in Western medicine from the late nineteenth century to the present day—asthma as a primary disorder of the lungs, an allergic condition, a disease associated with environmental irritants, and a disease linked to emotional distress.

While there is a great deal of overlap, each perspective on asthma has its insights on the mechanisms of asthma and clinical approach to managing the disease.



Steam atomizer
Courtesy Mütter Museum,
The College of Physicians of Philadelphia

Over time, asthma sufferers have sought relief from experts in lung diseases, allergists, general practitioners, and psychiatrists. People's experiences with asthma have always been influenced by the kind of practitioner they consulted and the times and places in which they lived.

(Current scientific and clinical thinking integrates these four perspectives by emphasizing that asthma control requires a combination of medications, reducing environmental exposures, and improving patient coping skills. And research now focuses on the interactions of genetics, the environment, and the immune system in causing asthma.)



Much of the National Institutes of Health's research focuses on the underlying causes of asthma in our bodies—at the molecular level.
Courtesy National Institutes of Health



Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919)

*Twenty-sixth president of the
United States of America.*

*Severe asthma made Theodore
Roosevelt a sickly infant and
virtually homebound child.*

*His parents tried all available
remedies and traveled worldwide
to find him a salutary climate.*

*But it was vigorous exercise that
helped turn him into a healthy,
productive adult.*

*Courtesy Prints and Photographs Division,
Library of Congress*

People everywhere in every age have struggled with asthma in different ways, but the feeling of breathlessness remains central to the disease. Today asthma is a serious, widespread problem affecting an estimated 17 million people in the United States. But what is asthma? Who has

*And the Lord God formed
man of the dust of the
ground, and breathed
into his nostrils the breath
of life; and man became
a living soul.*

Genesis 2:7

asthma and why?

Have its prevalence and impact grown dramatically in our time? Can it be managed, prevented, or

cured? How do people cope with asthma?

To search for answers, this exhibition examines the medical and human history of asthma. The times and places in which people live shape their experience of the disease.

Healers battle it using the tools and knowledge of their time. People from all ages and walks of life are here—poets and politicians, doctors and demagogues, singers and sports heroes—all who have responded valiantly, often creatively, to the challenges of living productively with asthma.

The exhibition concludes with resources for coping with asthma today, and a glimpse of what the future might bring.

The Faces of Asthma

Asthma has many different faces: it is more than just the symptoms that patients experience. Asthma is also about people—individuals and their families, communities, health care providers, and medical scientists.



Art Monk

Courtesy Jonathan Daniel/Allsport

Some people who have asthma benefit from current asthma treatments and achieve great honors in their chosen profession. Others learn to manage their asthma and lead full and productive lives. The faces of asthma are many and varied—some of these people may be standing right beside you.

Asthma Research Today

The National Institutes of Health provides funding to scientists throughout the world to conduct research on asthma. The goals of this work are to improve understanding of the causes and mechanisms of asthma and identify better ways to treat, manage, and ultimately cure or prevent the disease. The three institutes that conduct and support most of this research are: the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

This exhibition was made possible by the generous support of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/breath/breathhome.html

